Of Masters and Puppets

How Elected Elites Hold Staffers Accountable*

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This paper examines the peculiar position of political staffers in representative democracies. Unlike many other political actors, staffers are directly involved in politics without having received a democratic mandate through elections. By applying the influential framework of delegation and accountability to this unique population, the paper takes an innovative look at the relationship between staffers and elected elites. Based on original survey data collected among Belgian and Dutch staffers, the paper analyses staffers' autonomy and influence and examines how they are controlled by party leaders, MP's and ministers through practices of recruitment and monitoring. While the results indicate that staffers have considerable autonomy and influence, they also show that elected elites have ample opportunities to control staffers – especially MP's and Ministers. Moreover, elected elites are closely involved in monitoring staffers with high degrees of political influence. Although these results demonstrate that the existence staffers does not entail a systemic democratic deficit, more in-depth research is needed to discover when control mechanisms like recruitment and monitoring are (in)effective tools to keep staffers accountable.

Keywords: Political staff • Representative Democracy • Democratic accountability

Word count: 7836

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Introduction

Political staffers participate in daily politics without having obtained a democratic mandate through elections. In contrast to politicians, they cannot be held accountable by voters and the general public remains largely unaware of their role outside the political spotlight. As a result, staffers seem to slip through the cracks of the democratic process. A growing number of scholars are raising pertinent questions concerning the democratic legitimacy of this unelected elite (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2007; Barbara S Romzek, 2000; S. Svallfors, 2017a). This paper aims to join this challenging debate by applying the theoretical framework of delegation and accountability to political staffers (Strom, 2003). By analysing how political decision-making power can be transferred legitimately along a democratic chain of delegation, this influential framework examines the interactions between political actors such as voters, representatives and governments. How exactly do political staffers fit into the democratic chain of delegation? In doing so, the paper aims to address a fundamental tension between professionalization and representative democracy: does the growing presence of staffers create an accountability deficit?

I argue that staffers' lack of a direct democratic mandate is not problematic in and of itself. Even if they have political influence, their pivotal role is not undemocratic as long as they "*are accountable to someone who is accountable to the electorate, the party organisation, or both*" (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017). However, this means that the accountability relationship between staffers and elected elites has important implications. For this reason, this paper focuses on the relationship between staffers and three types of elected elites: party leaders, MP's and government ministers. Based on survey data collected among Belgian and Dutch political staffers (N=1008), I analyse the structural accountability mechanisms that keep staffers responsive towards these political principals. Although several control mechanisms can be used to keep staffers in line, this paper explicitly focuses on so-called 'police patrol oversight', in which principals (elected elites) directly control their agents (staffers) (McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984). Are the elected political masters themselves involved in controlling the puppets who make up their staff?

The paper offers an empirical examination of the mundane, everyday political practices that ensure this structural accountability. The analysis is driven by three research questions. The first research question addresses staffers' ability to affect political decision-making: *How autonomous and influential are political staffers (RQ1)?* The second research question examines how frequently elected elites make use of the control mechanisms at their direct disposal: *How strong is the involvement of elected elites in the recruitment and monitoring of staffers (RQ2)?* The third research question investigates the link between autonomy, influence and control to examine whether elected elites actually control the staffers who

matter the most. *Are elected elites more involved in controlling highly autonomous and influential staffers (RQ3)?* The results show that there is no structural accountability deficit among Belgian and Dutch staffers. Despite relatively high levels of autonomy and influence, elected elites have ample opportunities to oversee and steer the work of staffers. Importantly, elected elites are more closely involved in the monitoring of influential staffers.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the theory section, the influential framework of delegation and accountability is applied to political staff. After situating staffers within the democratic chain of delegation, I develop three hypotheses concerning the relationship between staffers and elected elites. The data and methods section addresses case selection, data collection and discusses how theoretical concepts such as autonomy, influence and control were operationalized empirically. The results section includes descriptive analyses of both staffers' autonomy and influence as well as the involvement of elected elites in the recruitment and monitoring of staffers. Furthermore, regression models were estimated to examine whether elected elites are more involved in the control of highly autonomous and influential staffers. Finally, the conclusion addresses the main findings and reflects on their implications.

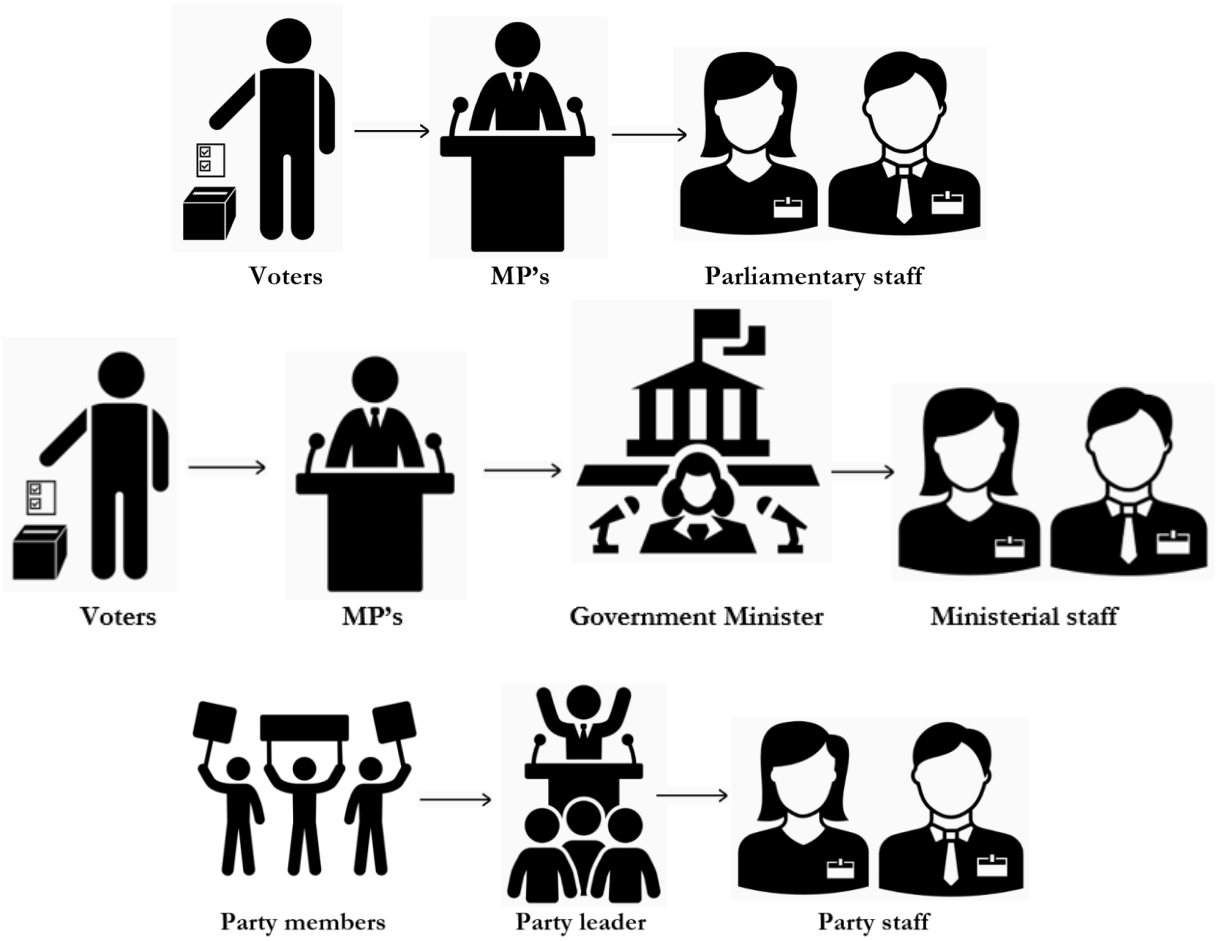
Staffers' democratic accountability

This paper aims to explore the democratic accountability of political staffers: those who get paid to work behind-the-scenes within a party's central office, parliamentary party group or ministerial office. In contrast to elected elites, staffers are appointed by party organizations or elected officials and are not elected. Research indicates that these unelected individuals have considerable influence on policy positions (Laube, Schank, & Scheffer, 2020; Montgomery & Nyhan, 2017), legislative activities (Busby & Belkacem, 2013), political communication (Sabag Ben-Porat & Lehman-Wilzig, 2020) and coordination between coalition partners in government (Askim, Karlsen, & Kolltveit, 2018; Maley, 2011). As a result, some have questioned the democratic legitimacy of this unelected yet pivotal elite (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2007; Barbara S Romzek, 2000; S. Svallfors, 2017a). However, the absence of a direct electoral mandate does not make political actors illegitimate. In parliamentary democracies for example, members of the executive branch do not receive a direct mandate from voters. Instead their position is legitimized through a process of delegation and accountability, emanating from directly elected representatives in parliament. To study this relationship, legislative scholars have developed a conceptual framework focusing on the interaction between principals and agents. Although the accountability question is a recurring

theme in research on staff, this well-developed conceptual framework has only rarely been applied to this specific population (see: Barbara S Romzek, 2000 for a notable exception).

The framework of delegation and delegation examines the interactions between principals and their agents (Strøm, 2000). As the agents in this story, staffers are delegated a number of tasks by a principal. While the relationship between parties and political staffers can also be studied through this perspective (Moens, 2020), this paper focuses on the link between staffers and three types of elected elites: party leaders, MP's and government ministers. Political staffers are hired by these elites to support them in their daily activities, such as holding an elected office or running a party. In doing so, these principals entrust staffers with certain aspects of their own electoral mandate because they lack the time and resources to manage all their activities individually. As these elected elites attained their position through an electoral mandate, figure 1 illustrates how political staffers are actually situated at the receiving end of a larger chain of delegation (Strom, 2003).

Figure 1: Staffers' position within the democratic chain of delegation



The position of parliamentary staffers within the democratic chain of delegation is the most straightforward. The process of delegation starts at the voting booth: by voting for a particular candidate and party, voters elect MP's to represent their interests and preferences. Consequently, parts of their democratic mandate is delegated to parliamentary staffers, who assist MP's in representing their voters. The activities of these staffers include constituency service (Landgrave & Weller, 2020), legislative work (Busby & Belkacem, 2013) and managing the external communication of representatives (Sabag Ben-Porat & Lehman-Wilzig, 2020). Although it involves an extra step with the process of delegation, the position of ministerial staffers is relatively similar. In parliamentary democracies, MP's partially transfer the democratic mandate they receive from voters to the executive branch. The government ministers are made responsible for implementing democratic decisions through votes of confidence. On their turn, these government ministers are supported by staffers who coordinate with coalition partners, civil servants and policy advice on a minister's competences (Maley, 2011; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2018).

As the democratic mandate of party leaders is less straightforward, the chain of delegation follows a different path for the staffers who support them. Firstly, party leadership selections are more idiosyncratic as procedures vary between parties and political systems (Lisi, Freire, & Barberà, 2015). The possibilities range from inclusive selection methods such as open primaries or election by members votes to exclusive selection methods such as coronations by elites within party councils (Cross & Pilet, 2015). Despite this diversity however, the mandate of party leaders often emanates from members as many parties have democratized leadership selection procedures during recent decades (Cross & Blais, 2012). In large majority of cases, party members are either represented by delegates who select the party leader at a convention or party members can directly vote for their preferred leadership candidate (Cross & Pilet, 2015). As shown in appendix A, all parties included in this study fall into one of these two common leadership selection methods. Secondly, party leaders are not just accountable to the rank-and-file of their parties but also respond to the preferences of voters. As leaders are principally responsible for the party as a whole, their internal support base often hinges on electoral results. However, the decision to stay on or step down ultimately remains an internal party affair. As the formal mandate of party leaders originates among party members within all parties included within this study, I consider party members as the cornerstone for this chain of delegation. Since party leaders cannot run a party on their own, they are supported by staffers who deliver tailored policy advice (Pittoors, Pattyn, & Van Hecke, 2017), manage the leaders' media presence and run the party machine.

This paper zooms in on the last step within these chains of delegation and accountability: the relationship between staffers and elected elites. This link is important because staffers' involvement in politics is not fundamentally problematic if they "*are accountable to someone who is accountable to the electorate, the party organisation, or both*" (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017). From the perspective of staffers, I examine their professional autonomy and political influence (RQ1). These are essential indicators to evaluate the potential risks and costs of agency loss. From the perspective of elected elites, I analyse how frequently elected elites control staffers by analysing the recruitment and monitoring of political staff (RQ2). Finally, I investigate whether more autonomous and influential staffers are controlled more intensely by elected elites (RQ3).

The first research question addresses staffers' autonomy and influence. In the context of the work place, autonomy refers to an area of discretion in which employees are allowed to make their own judgements and decisions (Wallander & Molander, 2014). For example, staffers' autonomy is high when they can determine their professional goals by themselves and decide on how those can be achieved. In contrast, staffers' autonomy can be considered low when such matters are in the hands of elected elites or managers and staffers themselves have little individual leeway. Staffers' influence refers to their impact on politics. Although staffers might not exercise power in direct or formal way, they can indirectly affect politics by shaping the activities, communication or policies of parties and politicians. This paper examines their influence on four dimensions: the party in general, the party leader, MP's and ministers. I consider both autonomy and influence as essential, necessary conditions for agency loss. Staffer can only diverge from the interests and preferences of elected elites in a substantial way if they have a) the autonomy to pursue their own goals and b) the influence to have an individual impact on politics.

Staffers are generally considered to have substantial autonomy and influence. For example, Romzek (2000) argues that the position of congressional staffers in the US includes a high degree of autonomy because the relationship between staffers and elected elites is not strictly hierarchical. Their interactions cannot be reduced to a relationship between supervisors and subordinates – it also includes a division of labour in which both have their own roles to perform. As elected elites primarily focus on their own role, they lack the time and energy to micro-manage staffers' activities. Rather than giving detailed directives, elected elites set the general goals that staffers are expected to pursue. Instead of merely following orders, staffers are expected to assess the situation, anticipate the preferences of elected elites and act accordingly. As this relationship is based on a high degree of trust (Gouglas, 2018), the concrete translation of these goals lies within staffers' accepted sphere of influence. "*Once a direction or task has been decided upon, staff are often given substantial latitude in deciding*

how to accomplish the goal" (Barbara S. Romzek & Utter, 1997, p. 1259). This puts a lot of faith in staffers because their role often requires them to rely on their own judgement. Moreover, they are often are encouraged to take on a pro-active, entrepreneurial role by taking initiative (Webb & Fisher, 2003). In effect, they are granted "*the discretion (or choice) to anticipate and respond to someone else's agenda or expectations"* (Barbara S Romzek, 2000, p. 418). I anticipate that this pivotal role leads staffers to perceive themselves to be both relatively autonomous and influential.

H1: Staffers generally consider themselves autonomous and influential.

The democratic chain of delegation implies that staffers' autonomy comes at the price of accountability. However, staffers' accountability is often problematized (Abbott & Cohen, 2014; Tiernan, 2007). For example, Svallfors (2020) cites the influential work of Dahl (2008), who warned that policy specialists might escape effective democratic control because they are not fully accountable for their actions. On occasion, this image is confirmed by scandals where responsibilities of staffers and elected elites are publicly debated. However, Romzek (2000) points out that accountability mechanisms extend way beyond such high-profile cases. "*Although outside observers only notice accountability when there is an administrative breakdown of some sort, effective accountability is an everyday occurrence, not something that is invoked only in the breach"* (Barbara S Romzek, 2000, p. 427). Rather than studying such individual breaches or anomalies, this paper examines the structural use of control mechanisms by elected elites.

The second research question addresses how frequently staffers are controlled by elected elites (RQ2). The principal aim of such control mechanisms is to prevent agency loss by keeping agents in line with the preferences and interests of their principals (Strom, 2003). By focusing on the direct involvement of elected elites in controlling staffers, the paper explicitly addresses 'police-patrol oversight', in which principals do much of the oversight themselves (Lupia, 2003; McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984). As a consequence, the analysis does not consider 'fire-alarm oversight', in which elected elites rely on others (managers, staffers' peers, media, …) to raise the alarm in case of agency loss. Principals can use 'ex-ante' control mechanisms (before the agent acts) as well as 'ex-post' control mechanisms (after the agent acts) (Lupia, 2003). To cover both types of control, the analysis examines the involvement of elected elites in staffers' recruitment (ex-ante) as well as the monitoring of staffers (ex-post). However, elected elites can be expected to devote little time and energy to controlling staffers because they are focused on their own political mandate. Indeed, Romzek & Utter (1997) conclude that "*Members of Congress, as staff supervisors, are the primary internal mechanism for legislative staff accountability. But the nature of the staff relationship is such that members have limited time, inclination, and ability to discern when staff have deployed their expertise in ways that undermine*

institutional purposes" (Barbara S. Romzek & Utter, 1997, p. 1254). Therefore, I anticipate that elected elites only rarely control staffers by themselves.

H2: The structural involvement of elected elites in controlling staffers is low.

The third research questions examines whether more autonomous and influential staffers are controlled more intensely by elected elites (RQ3). Despite the expectation that the general involvement of elected elites in controlling staffers will be low, I anticipate that their involvement will vary considerably between different types of staffers. As elected elites cannot control all staffers permanently, I argue that staff oversight by elected elites is based on strategic considerations. Elected elites will focus their limited time and energy on controlling those staffers where potential agency loss is the most consequential. More specifically, agency loss among staffers with high levels of autonomy and political influence can cause the most damage. The underlying reason for this lies at the heart of the democratic chain of delegation and accountability. Highly autonomous and influential staffers have been entrusted with important aspects of the democratic mandate received elected elites. Almost by definition, these types of staffers "*work in close consultation with [elected elites] and take direction from their members regarding goals. Depending upon a level of experience and trust, there is the potential for reciprocal relationships, where some staff can influence their member's goals*" (Barbara S. Romzek & Utter, 1997, p. 1259). I anticipate that such close working relationships cause elected elites to participate personally in the recruitment and monitoring of staffers in such positions.

H3: Highly autonomous and influential staffers are controlled more strongly by elected elites.

Data and method

This study examines staffers from Belgium and the Netherlands. Both nations are historically divided societies which have overcome societal cleavages through consociationalism and power-sharing (Andeweg & Irwin, 2009; Deschouwer, 2009). Their highly proportional electoral systems have produced extensive, complex party systems that require cooperation through coalition government (Lijphart, 1978, 1981). In both countries, this institutional context has created collective staff infrastructures centred around parties, who predominantly recruit staffers within their own network (Moens, 2020). By combining these two cases, the empirical analysis can exploit the many variations between more than a thousand staffers from fourteen political parties. Moreover, it enhances the robustness of the findings as they extend beyond the peculiarities of one specific case.

Despite their many similarities however, two relevant points of difference between Belgium and the Netherlands have an impact on the analysis. Firstly, the institutional position of party leaders is different. Whereas Belgian party leaders reside within the dominant extra-parliamentary party organizations (De Winter & Dumont, 2006), the position of Dutch party leaders usually coincides with the position of party group leader in parliament (Andeweg, 2000). Secondly, staff support for ministers differs as ministerial offices play a far more central role in Belgian politics (Brans, Pelgrims, & Hoet, 2006). As a member of the European continental administrative tradition (Painter & Peters, 2010), impartial civil servants provide the most important policy advice to Dutch ministers as they are only assisted by a handful of political staffers. As a member of the Napoleonic tradition, an extensive team of partisan 'cabinet advisors' provide the most important policy advice to Belgian ministers and distrust fuels the marginalization of a politicized civil service (De Winter & Brans, 2003).

Data collection

Original survey data were collected among the paid staff of fourteen parties (Appendix A). Since the support of party leadership was indispensable for contacting the target population, face-to-face interviews with senior party management were set up to gain an official endorsement. Although parties are often reluctant to provide access to their personnel (Webb & Keith, 2017; Webb & Kolodny, 2006), this approach resulted in the participation of 14 out of 25 parties represented in the Belgian and Dutch parliaments. Apart from the radical right family (which refused to participate), these cases mirror the diversity of the party landscape in electoral size, organizational resources and ideological outlook. Before launching the online survey, a carefully-developed questionnaire was tested among party staffers during 33 face-to-face interviews.

Designed to be completed in under 15 minutes, the questionnaire contained general background questions on staffers' sociodemographic characteristics, day-to-day professional activities and previous professional experiences, but also gauged their political attitudes, future ambitions and their interactions with peers and elected elites. Between December 2018 and January 2020, the complete population of staffers from the participating parties received a digital invitation to answer this online questionnaire, followed up by two reminders. Out of a population of 2936 individuals, the survey obtained a response rate of 34% (N=1009). To calculate response rates and check the representativeness of our findings, participating parties provided population data. Based on the weighted cases approach (Parke, 2012), X^2-tests were run to test under – or overrepresentation among specific subgroups within the sample. Post-stratification weights were calculated based on

population data on the number of staffers within each party, party face and age category (weighting factors range from 0,63 to 1,37).

Variables and analysis

The analysis considers two independent variables to measure potential agency loss: staffers' professional autonomy and staffers' political influence. Professional autonomy was operationalized as 11-point scale ranging from 0 (low autonomy) to 10 (high autonomy). Political influence was measured on 4 scales, each covering a different dimension of influence: the party in general, the party leader, MP's and government ministers. The operationalization is identical for all dimension as these variables were measured through 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (no influence) to 7 (very high influence). The analysis examines both ex-ante control and ex-post control by elected elites as the dependent variables. Ex-ante control was operationalized as the involvement of three types of elected elites in staffers' recruitment: party leaders, MP's and government ministers. This operationalization results in three dummy-coded variables indicating whether or not a specific elected official was involved in the recruitment and selection of a staffer (0=not involved, 1=involved). Ex-post control was operationalized as the frequency of contact between staffers and the same elected officials: party leaders, MP's and government ministers. The operationalization is identical for all variables: a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (daily).

Admittedly, contact does not guarantee effective control by elected elites as conversations with staffers can cover many other subjects. However, I consider frequent contact as a necessary condition for effective monitoring by elected elites. Moreover, a similar argument can be made for the direct involvement of elected elites in staff recruitment. As such, these two variables show to what extent elected elites have the opportunity to control the actions of staffers. Whether they use these opportunities to exert effective control is beyond the scope of this paper. Lastly, the party face in which staffers are professionally active was added as a control variable because staffers' influence and their relation to specific elites is strongly connected to their position. Based on the location where staffers spend most of their time during their professional activities, they were grouped into three mutually exclusive categories: the party's central office, parliament or a ministerial office.

Table 1: Variables

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES					
Professional autonomy	992	0	10	7,9	1,38
Political influence					
Party in general	994	1	7	3,30	1,54
Party leader	994	1	7	2,48	1,44
Party in Parliament	992	1	7	3,13	1,68
Minister	986	1	7	3,33	2,02
DEPENDENT VARIABLES					
Recruitment					
Party leader	998	0	1	0,03	0,16
MP's	550	0	1	0,32	0,47
Minister	554	0	1	0,26	0,44
Contacts					
Party leader	916	1	5	2,23	1,19
MP's	914	1	5	3,45	1,26
Minister	918	1	5	3,6	1,53
CONTROLS					
Party face					
Central office	1008	0	1	0,21	0,41
Parliament	1008	0	1	0,30	0,46
Ministerial Office	1008	0	1	0,49	0,50

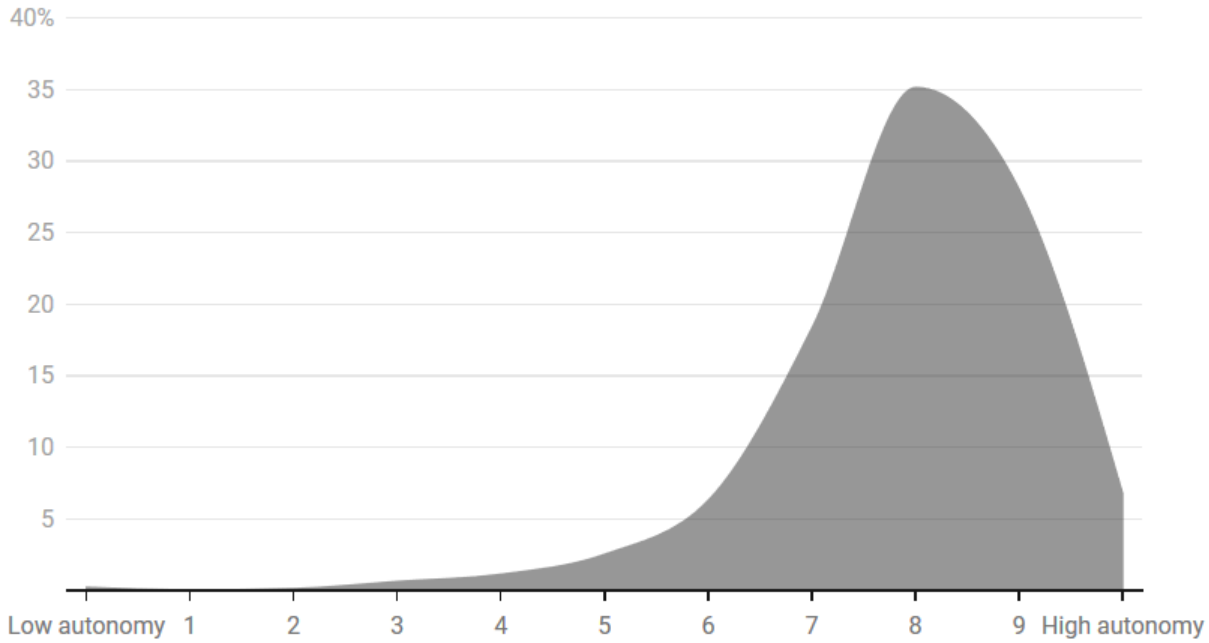
To answer the first research question, the paper examines the distributions of staffers' self-perceived autonomy and influence descriptively. While the analysis of staffers' professional autonomy examines the whole population of staffers, the analysis of staffers' political influence offers a more fine-grained picture. Although it considers the whole population to show staffers' influence on the party in general, the analysis of staffers' influence on elected elites only includes the staffers who work within the same party face as the concerned elected official (party leader, MP's or ministers). The distribution of staffers who work in different party faces than the concerned elected official are included in appendix B. The paper then describes the prevalence of two control mechanisms to address the second research question. After showing the involvement of elected elites in staffers' recruitment in general and within their own party face, the paper discusses the frequency of contacts between elected elites and the staffers who work within the same party face. Lastly, I examine the relation between potential agency loss (autonomy and influence) and control by elected elites (recruitment, monitoring) through an explanatory analysis.

The link between potential agency loss and recruitment is analysed through 3 binomial regression models, one for each type of elected official (party leader, MP or minister). Similarly, the relation between potential agency loss and monitoring is examined through 3 OLS regressions explaining the frequency of contacts between staffers and three types of elected elites (party leader, MP or minister).

Results

Staffers' self-perceived professional autonomy is remarkably high. The average score on the 11-point scale between 0 and 10 is 7,9. As illustrated by Figure 2, this high degree of professional autonomy is nearly universal among staffers: the overwhelming majority (95%) is concentrated on the right side of the scale. Only a tiny minority of staffers (3%) reportedly experience a low degree of professional autonomy by indicating a value below 5. Despite some small differences, this specific pattern can be observed among staffers from central offices, parliaments and ministerial offices alike. While central office staffers consider themselves a tiny bit less autonomous ($p<0.1$) and ministerial staffers are slightly more autonomous ($p<0.1$), the large concentration of staffers on the highly autonomous side is clearly visible among staffers from all party faces. Specific distribution plots for each party face and the details of the T-tests can be found in appendix B.

Figure 2: Staffers' professional autonomy (N=992)



Based on this high degree of autonomy, one might be tempted to conclude that the potential for agency loss among staffers is quite high. However, I argue that professional autonomy can lead to agency loss if staffers have actual influence on political matters. For this reason, these findings on

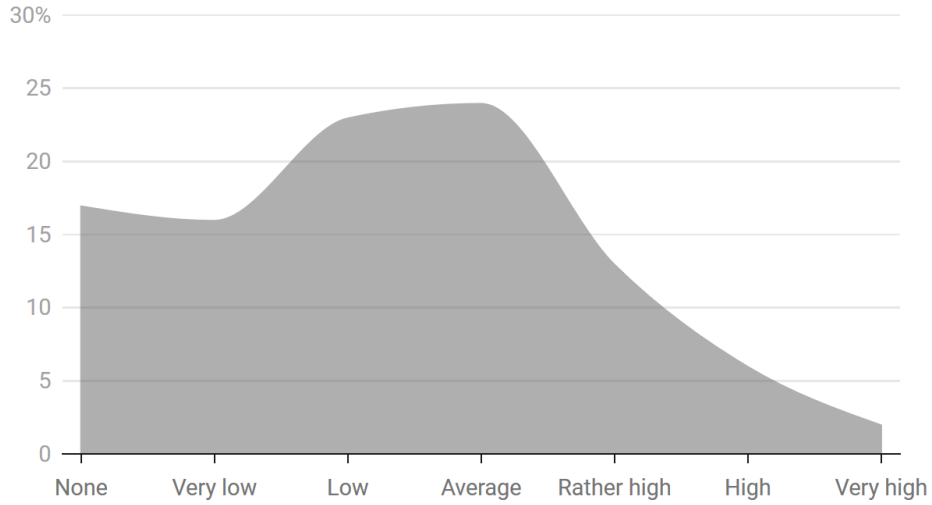
staffers' professional autonomy should be analysed in close tandem with staffers' political influence. Staffers' self-perceived political influence shows how staffers' impact on politics is more complex than suggested by measuring autonomy. When it comes to actual influence on political matters, a more limited group of staffers actually consider themselves influential (Figure 3). The analysis takes an in-depth look at staffers' influence by considering four specific dimensions of influence: parties in general, party leaders, MP's and ministers. As the distribution of staffers is remarkably different across these four dimensions, they are clearly more politically involved in parliaments and ministerial offices.

Staffers rarely consider themselves influential on a general level. On this first dimension, staffers from all party faces (central office, parliament and ministerial office) are included in the distribution. The results show that most consider their general influence low to average. Only one in five indicates that their influence is higher than average. Secondly, those work within the same party face as the party leader (Belgian central offices, Dutch parliament) also seem to have little substantial influence of their leaders' activities and positions. Again, most consider their influence on this dimension low to average and only around 20% of staffers situate their influence above average. In short, few staffers have a substantial impact on the general course of their party or their party leader. This is not particularly surprising, as single staffers are merely individuals within the collective machinery that supports the party and its leader. In contrast, the political influence of staffers in parliaments and ministerial offices is both higher and more focused. Although the reach of party leaders trumps the activities of individual representatives, MP's are clearly more susceptible to staffers' influence. Almost half of all parliamentary staffers (43%) indicate that their influence on the activities of MP's is above average. This effect is even stronger among those who work in ministerial offices, as the majority of ministerial staffers (56%) consider themselves influential.

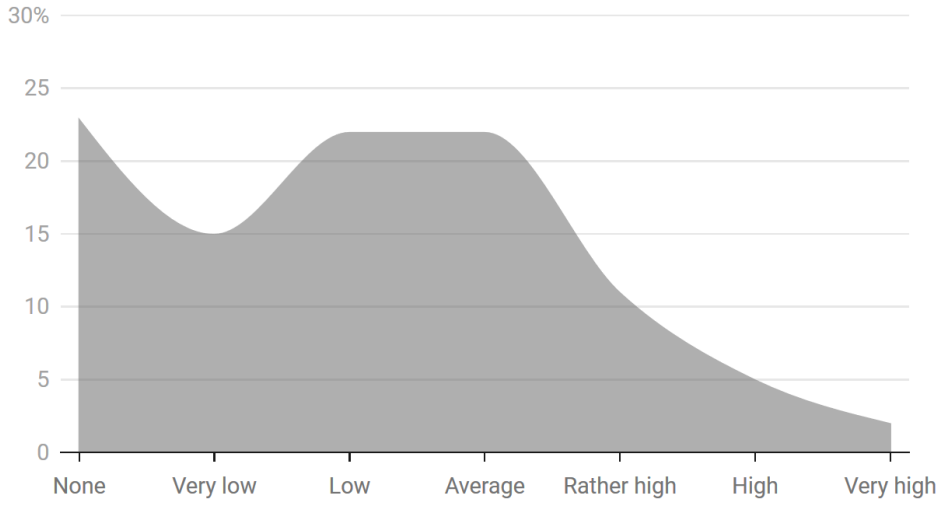
These findings partially confirm the first hypothesis, which stated that staffers generally consider themselves autonomous and influential. The evidence on their autonomy are unequivocal: the large majority of staffers consider themselves highly autonomous. When it comes to influence, the results are more nuanced. While few staffers appear to have an impact on their party leader or the general course of the party, they consider themselves relatively influential on more specified dimensions – such as the activities and positions of MP's and government ministers.

Figure 3: Staffers' influence on 4 dimensions

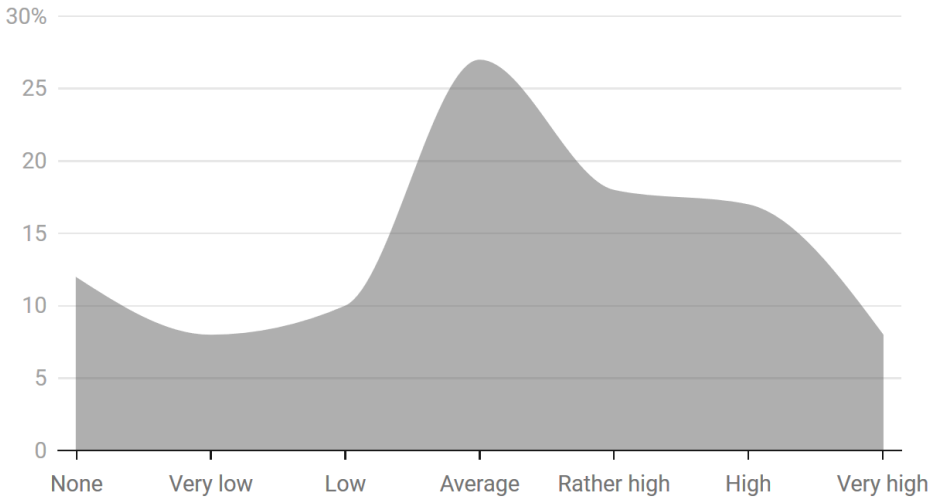
Influence on party in general (N=994)



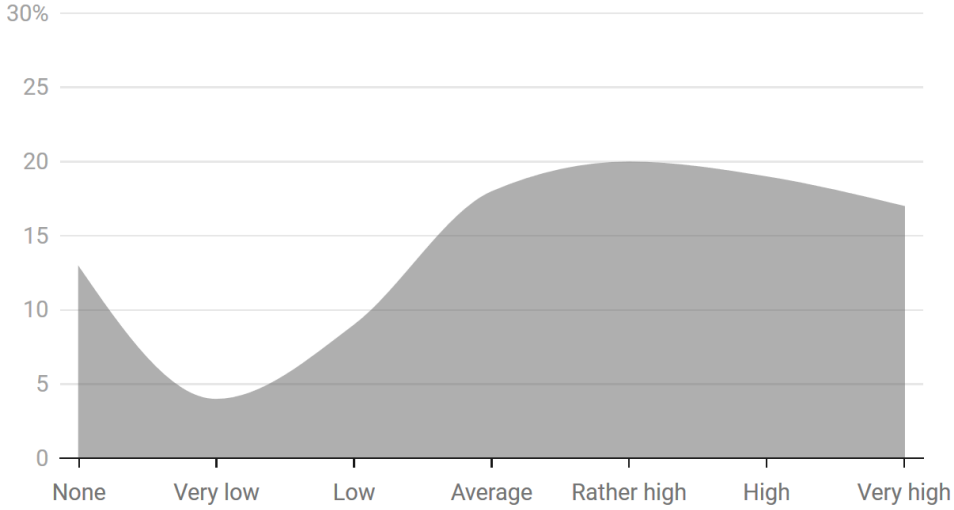
Influence on party leader (N=242)



Influence on MP's (N=301)

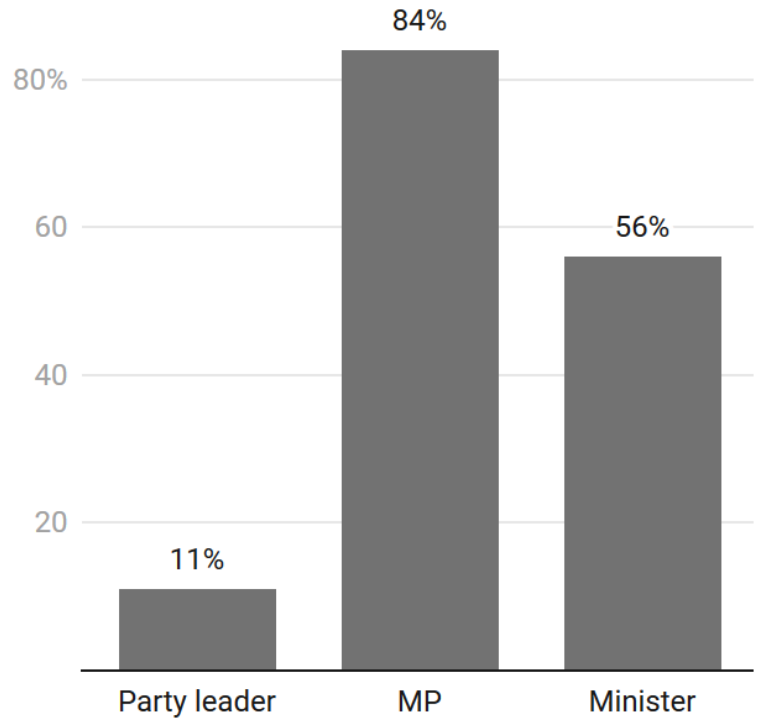


Influence on Minister (N=480)



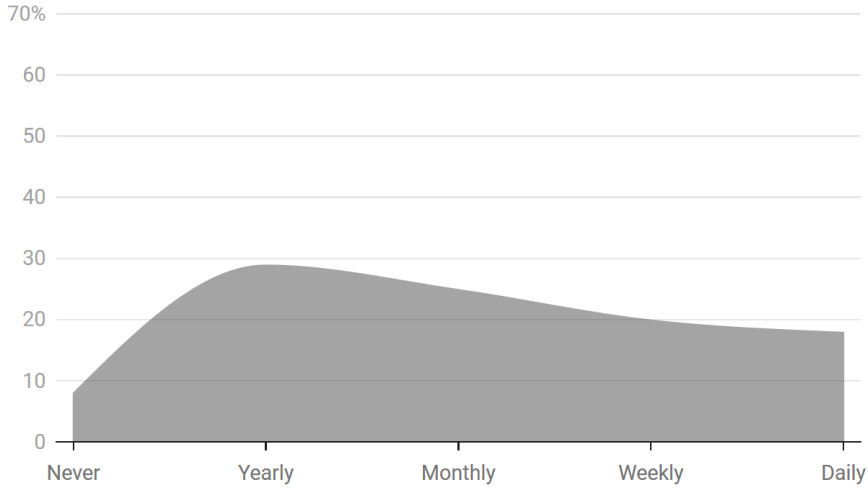
To examine the use of control mechanisms by elected elites, I analyse their involvement in the recruitment and monitoring of staffers. I first consider how often elites participate in the selection of new staff. The involvement of elected elites in staffers' recruitment is a form of ex-ante control, as they can directly affect the composition of their staff by participating in the selection of candidates. Figure 4 illustrates that the involvement of MP's and ministers in staff recruitment is substantially higher than the involvement of party leaders. As MP's actively participate in the selection of more than 80% of all parliamentary staffers, they are the most active recruiters among elected elites. Although the involvement of government ministers is somewhat lower, they are nonetheless directly involved in the selection of just over 50% of all ministerial staffers. These rates stand in stark contrast to party leaders, who participate in very few recruitments.

Figure 4: Participation of elected elites in staff recruitment (N=998)

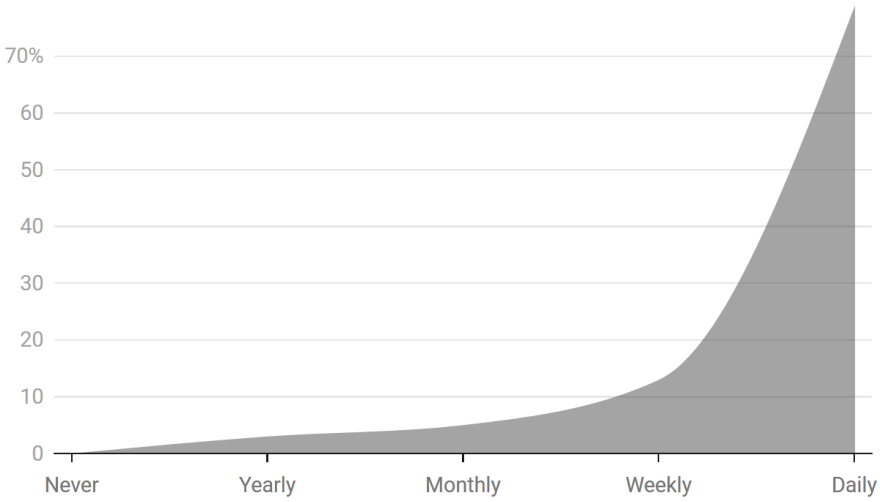


In contrast to recruitment, monitoring is a permanent control mechanism. Direct contacts with staffers enable elected elites to a) preventively signal their preferences to staffers and b) receive information on staffers' recent activities. Again, the analysis demonstrates a sharp contrast between party leaders, MP's and ministers. Among staffers who work within the same party face as party leaders, only a minority of 38% indicate that they meet the party leader at least once a week. Despite working at the official seat of power, direct contact with party leaders remains quite a rare event for most staffers. This stands in stark contrast with other elected elites such as MP's and ministers.

Contacts with Party leader (N=225)



Contacts with MP's (N=284)



Contacts with Ministers (N=437)

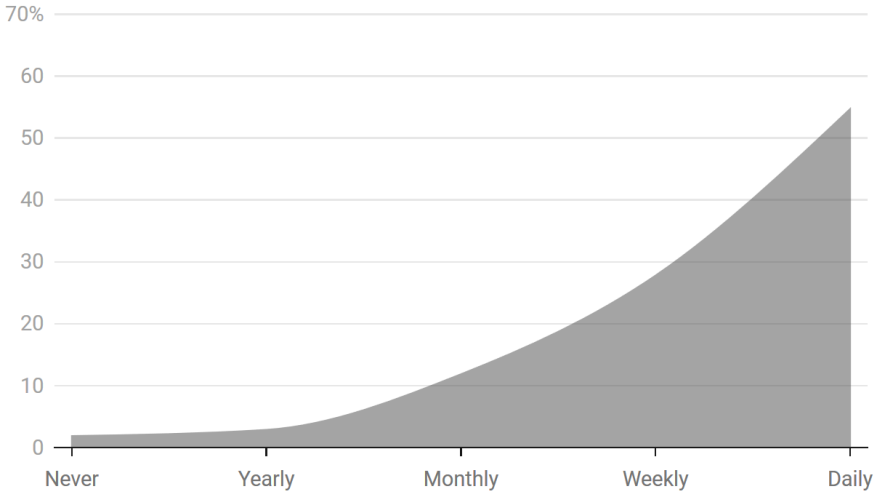


Figure 5: Monitoring by elected elites

Among parliamentary staffers, an overwhelming majority of 92% interacts with MP's at least once a week. For most of them, contacts with MP's are part of their daily routine. Although there is a little more distance between ministers and their staff, a similar pattern can be observed among ministerial staffers, of whom 83% meets their minister at least once a week. Moreover, about half of all ministerial staffers interact with their minister on a daily basis.

It is likely that the differences between MP's, ministers and party leaders reflect their respective political roles and the support structures that come with it. As party leaders are responsible for the party as a collective organization, they lack the time to actively control all staff many staffers – even within their own party face. Rather than micro-managing their staff, these responsibilities are delegated to staffers in management positions. In contrast, MP's are supported by more limited staffs. As a result, controlling them is less time-consuming. Moreover, these smaller staffs include few managers who might take over the control of staffers. Ministers fall somewhere in between both situations. On the one hand, ministerial staffers do not support a collective organization: they are directly accountable to individual ministers. On the other hand, the extensive Belgian ministerial offices do include several managers to whom the control of staffers can be delegated. These findings do not support the second hypothesis, which anticipated that the involvement of elected elites in the control of staffers is generally low. Although this certainly appears to be the case for party leaders, MP's and government ministers elites frequently make use of control mechanisms such as recruitment and monitoring.

Lastly, I examine whether control by elected elites is higher for those staffers among whom agency loss would be the most costly. To evaluate the use of ex-ante control, three binary logistic regressions were estimated to show when party leaders, MP's or ministers get involved in staff recruitment. Table 2 shows that the involvement of elected elites in staffers' recruitment is linked to staffers' political influence but not to their professional autonomy. The first model demonstrates that party leaders are more likely to be involved in the recruitment staffers who influence them later on. Although this direct link between influence on – and recruitment by specific elected elites might seem evident, this is not the case for MP's and Ministers. Although they are significantly more involved in the recruitment of staffers within their own party faces, they do not necessarily select those staffers who influence them later on. Surprisingly, ministerial staffers selected by ministers do consider themselves significantly more influential in general – but not towards their own minister.

Table 2: Explaining ex-ante control by elected elites – recruitment

	Party Leader	MP's	Ministers
Professional autonomy	1,38 (0,20)	1,10 (0,11)	1,08 (0,10)
Political influence			
Party in general	0,87 (0,17)	1,12 (0,13)	1,33 (0,11) *
Party leader	1,52 (0,19) *	-	-
MP's	-	1,00 (0,12)	-
Minister	-	-	1,07 (0,09)
Controls			
Same party face	2E+8 (1480)	77,89 (0,34) ***	99,66 (0,58) ***
Constant	0,00 (1480)	0,02 (0,92) ***	0,00 (1,00 ***
Nagelkerke R^2	0,39	0,68	0,56
N	928	571	570

Note: Odds Ratio's (Standard Errors) of Binomial Logistic regressions; ° p ≤ .1, * p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01, *** p ≤ .001

The link between staffers' self-perceived influence and permanent monitoring is consistent. Those with a higher degree of influence are monitored more closely. This is the case for monitoring by party leaders, MP's and ministers alike (see: Table 3). Moreover, party leaders do not only have more contacts with the staffers who influence them, they also monitor autonomous staffers more closely (p>0.1). MP's interact significantly more often with staffers with more influence on the party in general and on MP's themselves. Similar to other elected elites, ministers interact more closely with those who influence them. Lastly, it is not surprising that party leaders, MP's and ministers have more frequent contacts with all staffers working within the same party face.

These findings provide some support for the third hypothesis, which stated that control by elected elites is stronger for staffers with higher levels of autonomy and influence. However, the observed patterns vary considerably. Firstly, control by elected elites is not stronger towards autonomous staffers – except for monitoring by party leaders. Secondly, the expected link between influence and control only applies to monitoring. Monitoring shows a consistent link between staffers' sphere of influence and their contacts with elected elites. For recruitment however, this clear-cut effect can only be observed for recruitment by party leaders. Although they rarely participate in staff recruitment, party leaders are significantly more present during the selection of staffers who will influence them later on. In contrast, this is not the case for MP's and ministers, who participate in staff selection more frequently.

Table 3: Explaining permanent control by elected elites – monitoring

	Party Leader	MP's	Ministers
Professional autonomy	0,04 (0,02) °	0,00 (0,02)	0,03 (0,02)
Political influence			
Party in general	-0,01 (0,03)	0,11 (0,03) ***	-0,01 (0,03)
Party leader	0,21 (0,03) ***	-	-
MP's	-	0,07 (0,03) **	-
Minister	-	-	0,10 (0,02) ***
Controls			
Same party face	1,15 (0,07) ***	1,67 (0,07) ***	1,78 (0,09) ***
Constant	1,02 (0,18) ***	2,37 (0,18) ***	1,87 (0,19) ***
Adjusted R^2	0,35	0,50	0,54
N	849	897	826

Note: Estimates (Standard Errors) of OLS regressions; ° p ≤ .1, * p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01, *** p ≤ .001

Discussion and conclusion

This paper set out to investigate the democratic legitimacy of political staffers by analysing their relationship with elected elites. Although the accountability of political staffers is regularly problematized (Barbara S Romzek, 2000; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2018; S. a. Svallfors, 2020), few scholars have applied the influential conceptual framework of delegation and accountability (Strom, 2003) to this peculiar population. By adapting this theoretical perspective to the population of political staffers, this innovative paper gave a fresh look into the systemic control of staffers by elected elites. The results show that staffers are highly autonomous and have substantial influence on the activities of MP's and government ministers. However, staffers' autonomy and political influence are not problematic because elected elites have ample opportunities to directly oversee and steer the actions of staffers. Importantly, all elected elites interact more frequently with influential staffers. This last finding is particularly encouraging from a democratic perspective, as agency loss among influential staffers could cause the most damage to the democratic chain of delegation. Both the high involvement of elected elites in recruitment and monitoring as well as the closer relationship to influential staffers show that political staffers do not foster a structural accountability deficit in Belgium and the Netherlands.

The analysis demonstrates that MP's and government ministers are more involved in controlling staffers than party leaders. Not only do MP's and government ministers participate in the recruitment of most of their staff, they interact at least once a week with nearly all of them. These findings make sense from the perspective of democratic accountability, as a sizeable group of staffers consider themselves influential towards MP's and government ministers and those working within the public face of the party are often more qualified (Moens, 2021). In contrast, only a handful of staffers have influence on the party leader. The accountability relationship between party leaders and staffers reflects these findings, as only a minority of staffers are recruited by party leaders or interact with them on a regular basis. Yet the relation between party leaders and staff appears to be more strategic as they consistently focus their limited time and energy on controlling those staffers who matter the most. For example, party leaders are significantly more present during the recruitment of staffers who will influence them later on. This is not the case for MP's and ministers, who participate in many recruitments but do not devote more attention to influential staff.

The strong connection between staffers' political influence and their contacts with elected elites leads to several potential explanations. While this paper has argued that the political influence of certain staffers causes elected elites to monitor them more closely, the causal mechanism could also run in the opposite direction. Staffers might perceive themselves more influential exactly because they have more frequent contacts with elected elites. Indeed, the frequency of contacts between staffers and elected politicians is only a proxy for control as the exact nature of these interactions remains undefined. Instead of avenues for unilateral control, such everyday interactions between elected and elites and staffers are likely to be reciprocal, resulting in intercursive power dynamics where both parties influence each other (Wrong, 2017). Yet even if the frequency of staffers' contacts with politicians increases their political influence, this observation is encouraging from a democratic viewpoint. If this would indeed be the case, it would demonstrate that staffers are not influential by themselves. Rather than bypassing elected representatives, staffers exert influence through their proximity to the elected elites who remain democratic accountable for their actions.

The structural analysis of staffers' accountability presented in this paper shows the central importance of the interactions between elected elites and their staff. Yet researchers have only scratched the surface of this pivotal relationship. In the future, the conceptual framework of delegation accountability can be applied to more in-depth analyses of the relationship between staffers and elected elites. At this point, it remains unclear whether elected elites actually seize the opportunities during recruitment and daily interactions to keep staffers responsive towards the

preferences and interests of their elected principals. Although this paper shows that staffers do not create accountability deficits on the macro level, this does not rule out disruptions of the democratic chain of delegation on the micro level. In this regard, I expect that the individual qualities of both staffers and elected elites are of central importance. For example, information-asymmetry might empower experienced staffers to subtly dominate newly elected representatives who lack insider knowledge of the political game (S. Svallfors, 2017b). Moreover, the power balance between elected elites could also have a substantial effect on their standing among staffers. As privileged observers of everyday politics, staffers can be expected to be acutely aware of the internal pecking order among elites. As a consequence, a close advisor to the party leader could actually exert more influence than an elected junior backbencher in parliament.

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Appendix A. Participating parties (N=14)

Party	Country	Party Family[#]	Vote Share	Total Staff	Governing status	Leadership Selectorate °	Response rate	Survey period
N-VA	Belgium	Conservative	20%	560	Government	Eligible members	32%	November 2018 - January 2019
CD&V	Belgium	Christian-Democratic	12%	521	Government	Eligible members	33%	December 2018 – March 2019
PS	Belgium	Socialist	12%	565	Opposition	Eligible members	29%	February 2019 - April 2019
VLD	Belgium	Liberal	10%	417	Government	Eligible members	37%	December 2018 - March 2019
Sp.a	Belgium	Socialist	9%	192	Opposition	Eligible members	34%	November 2018 – May 2019
Groen	Belgium	Green	5%	91	Opposition	Eligible members	45%	January 2019 - March 2019
PVDA-PTB	Belgium	Radical Left	4%	65	Opposition	Delegates to a party convention	38%	January 2019 - April 2019
Ecolo	Belgium	Green	3%	104	Opposition	Eligible members	46%	March 2019 – April 2019
Défi	Belgium	Liberal	2%	103	Opposition	Eligible members	19%	March 2019 – April 2019
VVD	Netherlands	Liberal	21%	107	Government	Eligible members	51%	October 2019 - December 2019
D66	Netherlands	Liberal	12%	93	Government	Eligible members	47%	September 2019 - November 2019
PvdA	Netherlands	Socialist	6%	62	Opposition	Eligible members	48%	September 2019 - January 2020
50Plus	Netherlands	Liberal	3%	27	Opposition	Eligible members	22%	October 2019 - November 2019
SGP	Netherlands	Conservative	2%	29	Opposition	Delegates to a party convention	48%	December 2019

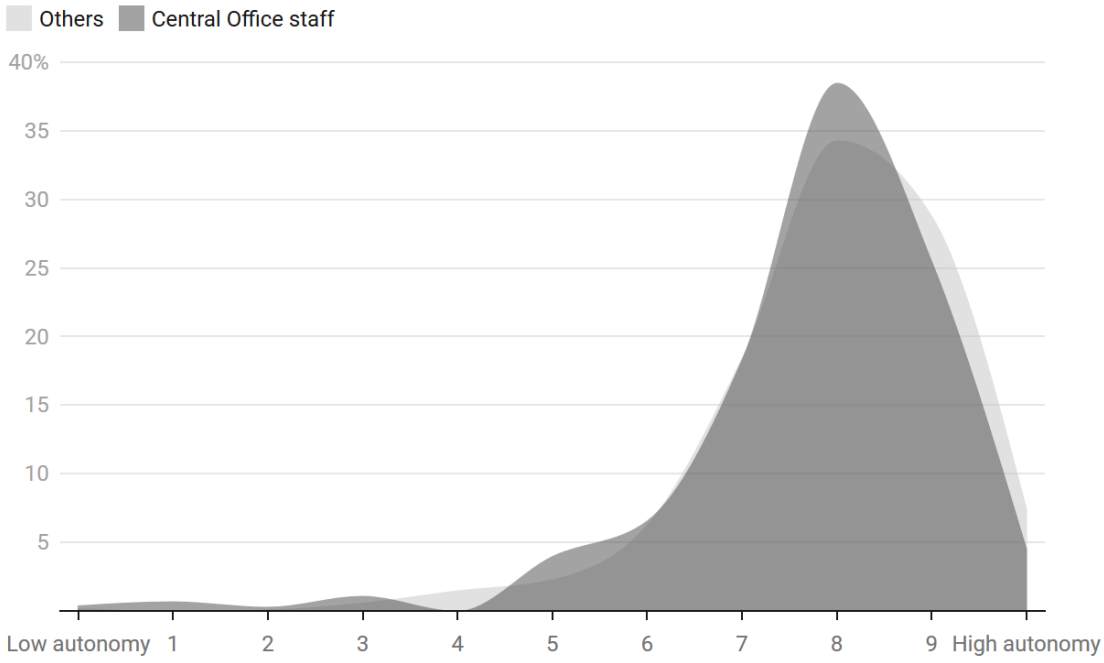
#: Parlgov Database, °: COSPAL database (Cross & Pilet, 2015)

Appendix B. Autonomy by party face

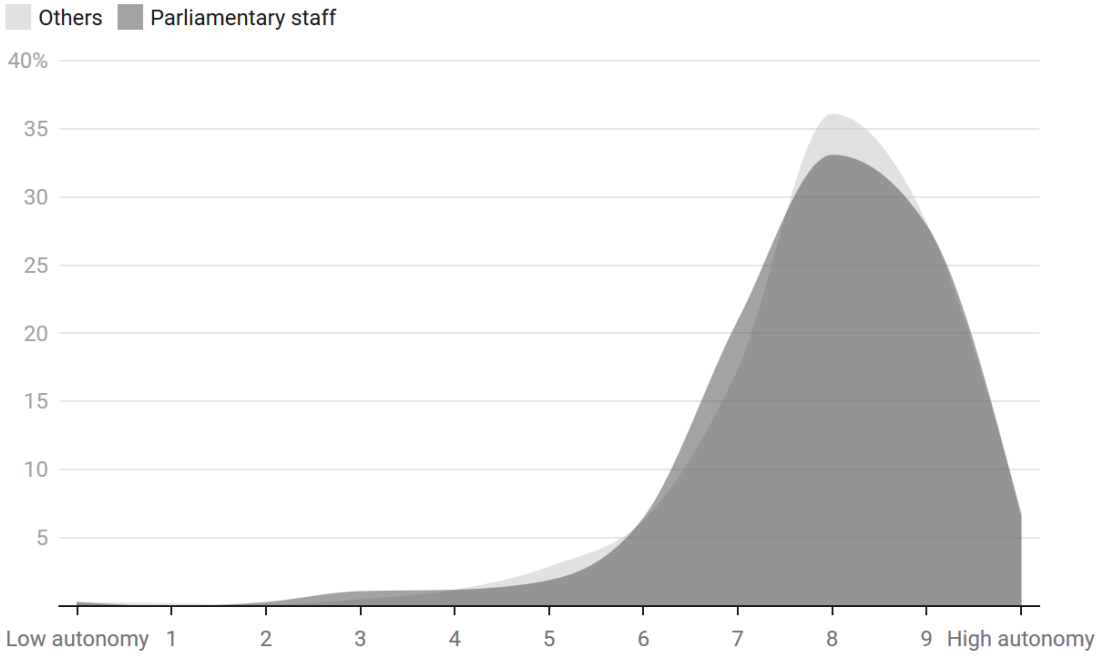
	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Central Office staff °	212	7,76	1,48	1,719	990	0,086
Parliamentary staff	302	7,87	1,40	0,508	990	0,612
Ministerial staff °	480	7,98	1,31	-1,874	990	0,061

Note: Independent Samples T-test with other party faces as ref. category: ° p ≤ .1, * p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01, *** p ≤ .001

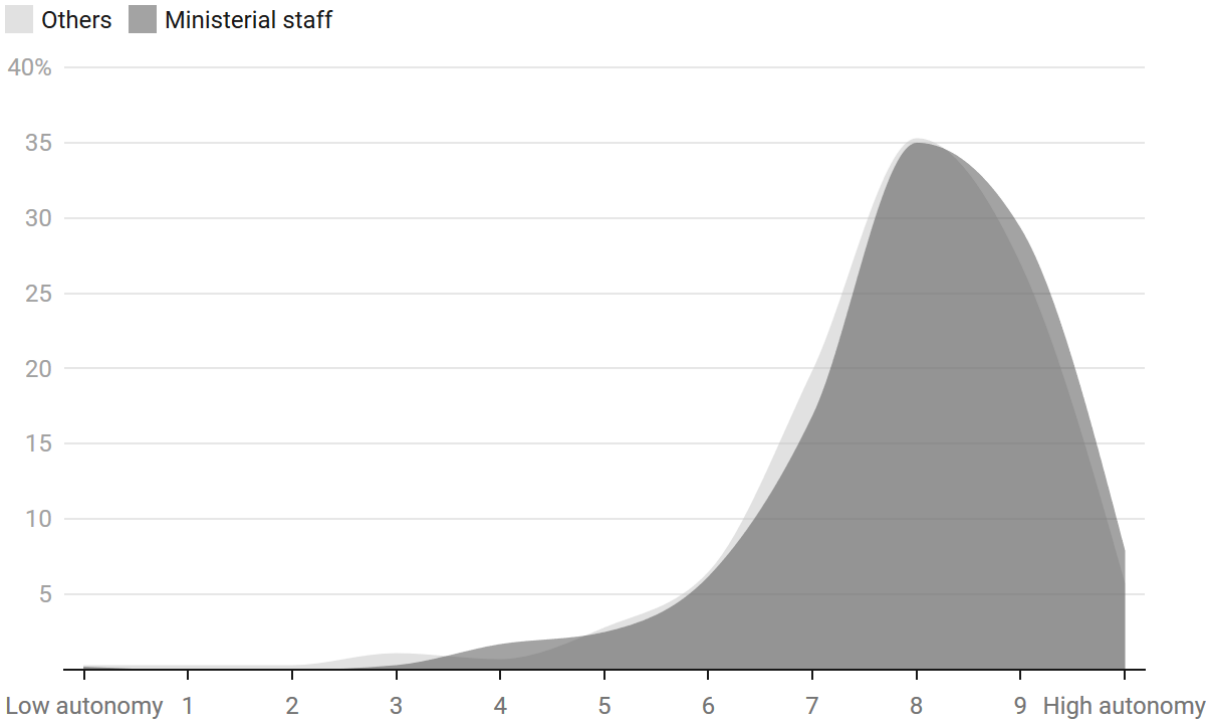
B.1. Autonomy of central office staff



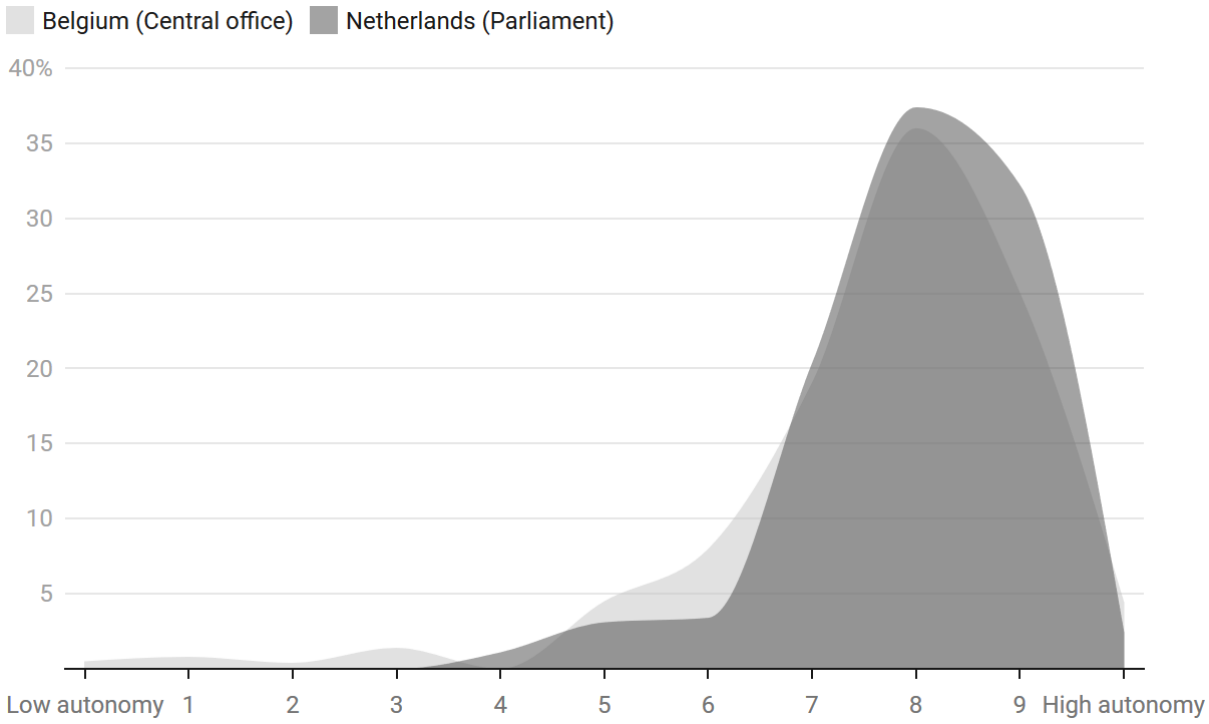
B.2. Autonomy of parliamentary staff



B.3. Autonomy of ministerial staff



B.4. Autonomy of staff within same party face as party leader



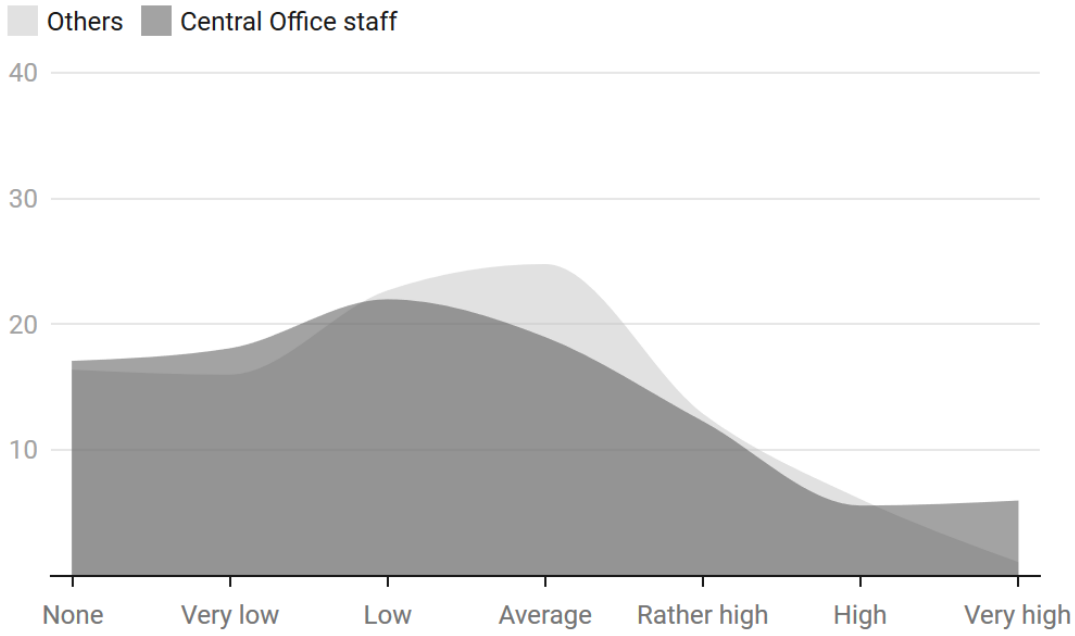
Appendix C. Influence by party face

C.1. Influence on party in general

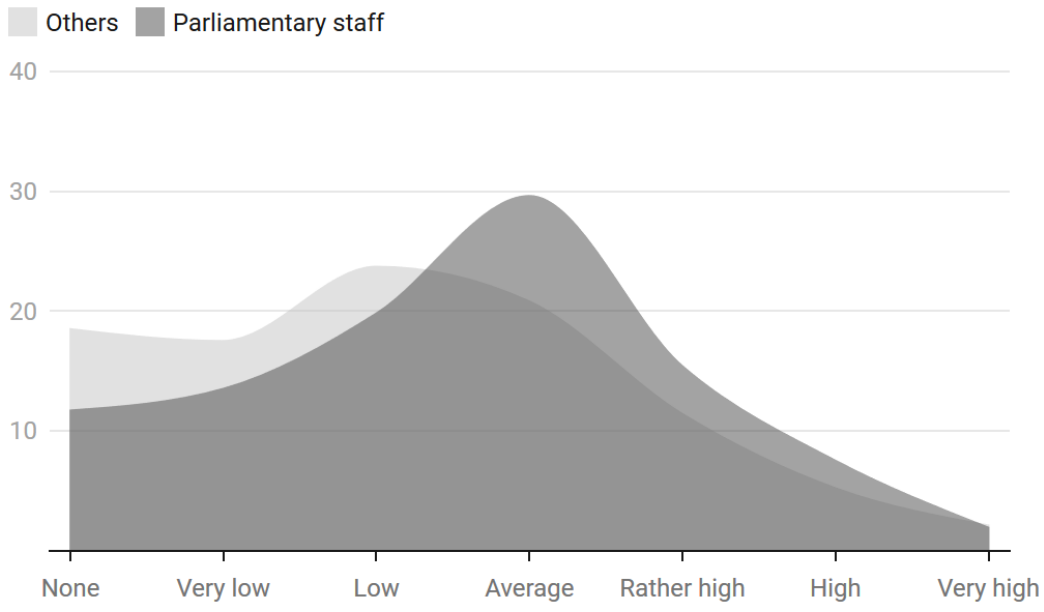
	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Central Office staff	212	3,32	1,71	-0,570	304	0,569
Parliamentary staff ***	302	3,54	1,49	-3,800	992	0,000
Ministerial staff ***	480	3,06	1,47	4,019	992	0,000

Note: Independent Samples T-test with other party faces as ref. category: ° p ≤ .1, * p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01, *** p ≤ .001

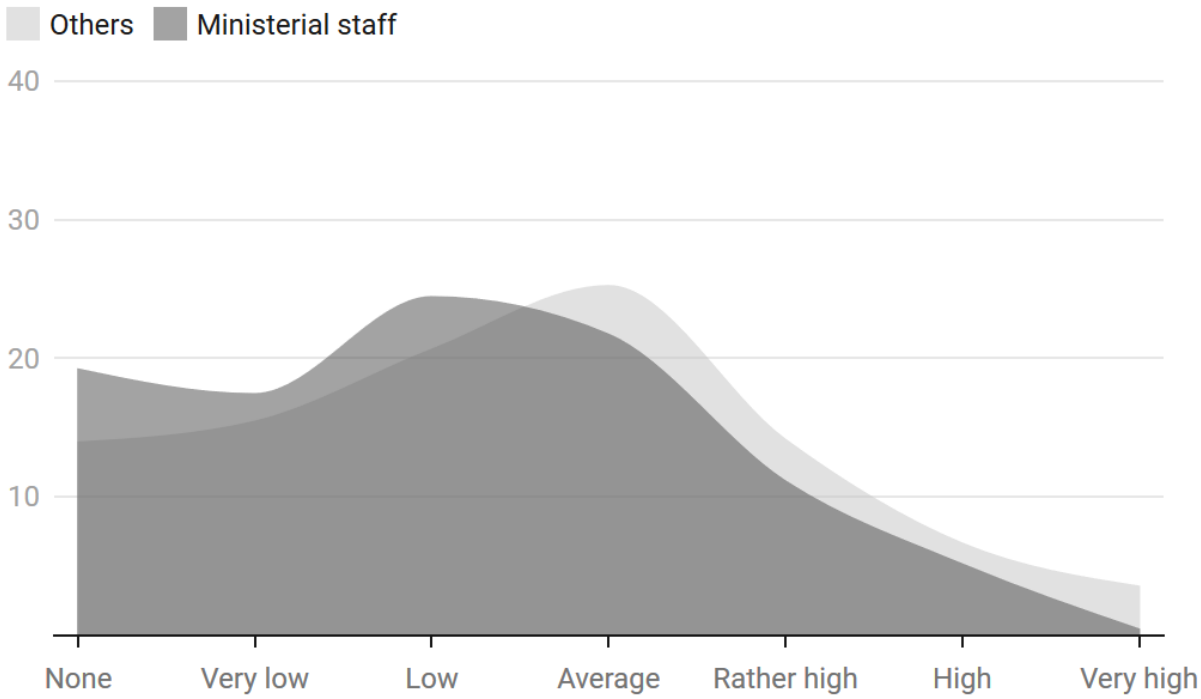
C.1.1. Influence on party in general of central office staff



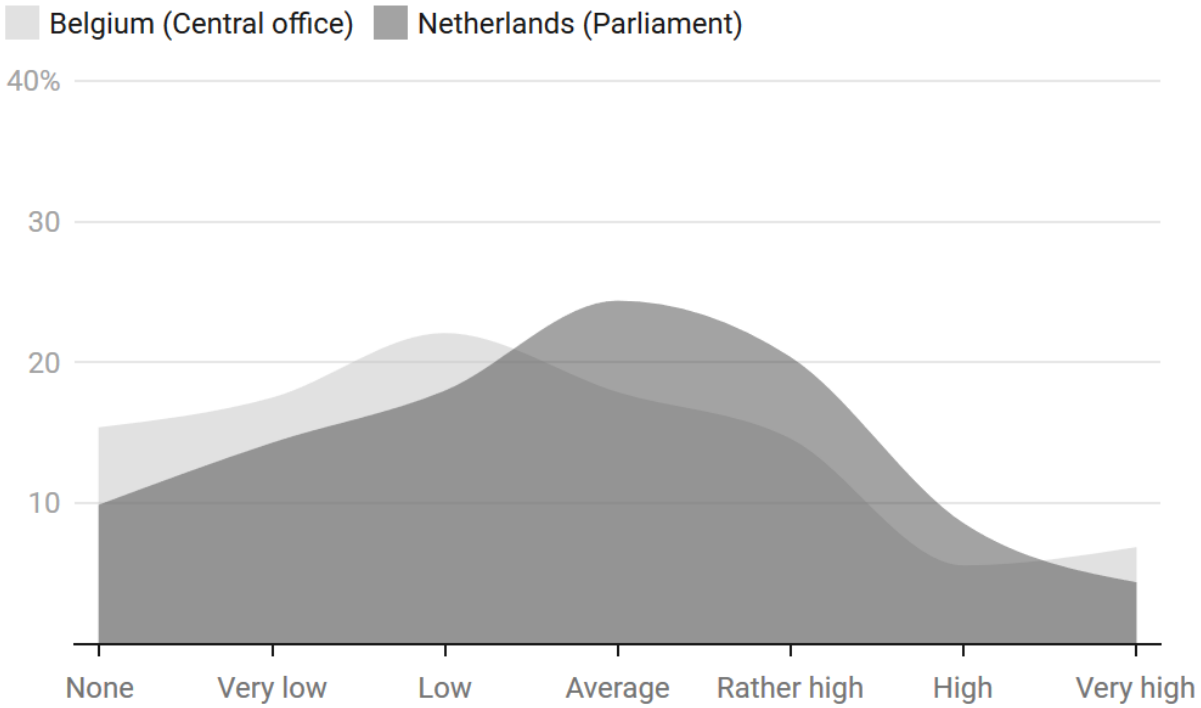
C.1.2. Influence on party in general of parliamentary staff



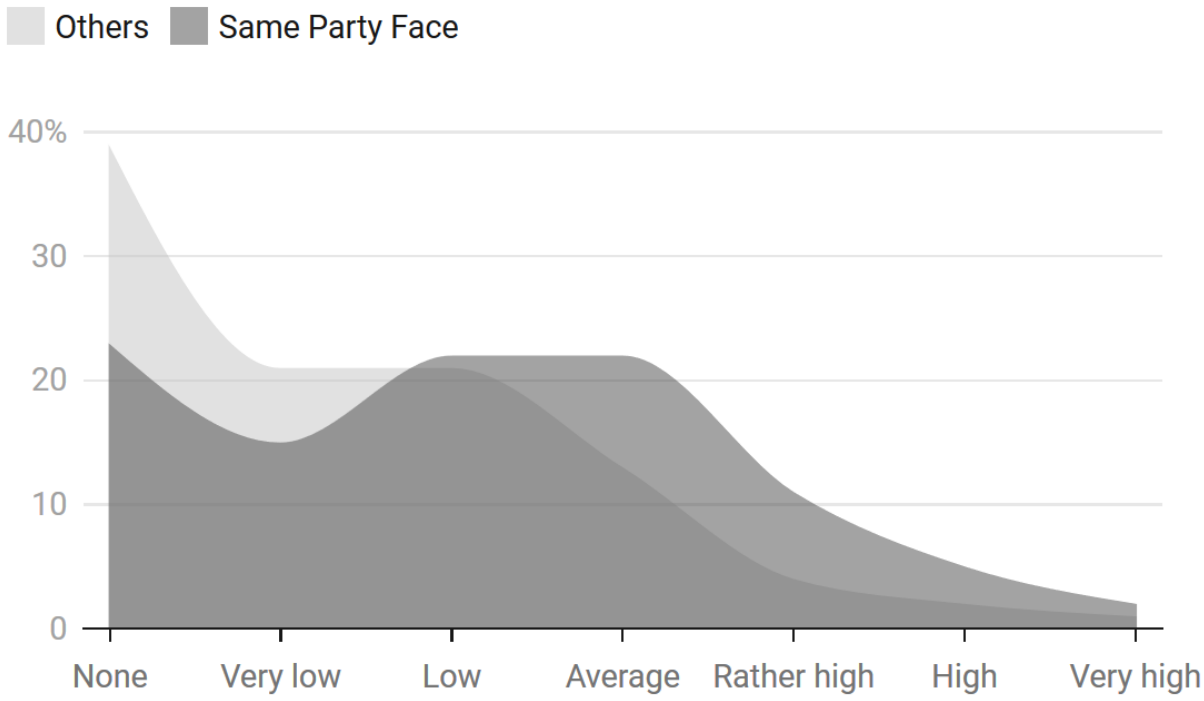
C.1.3. Influence on party in general of ministerial staff

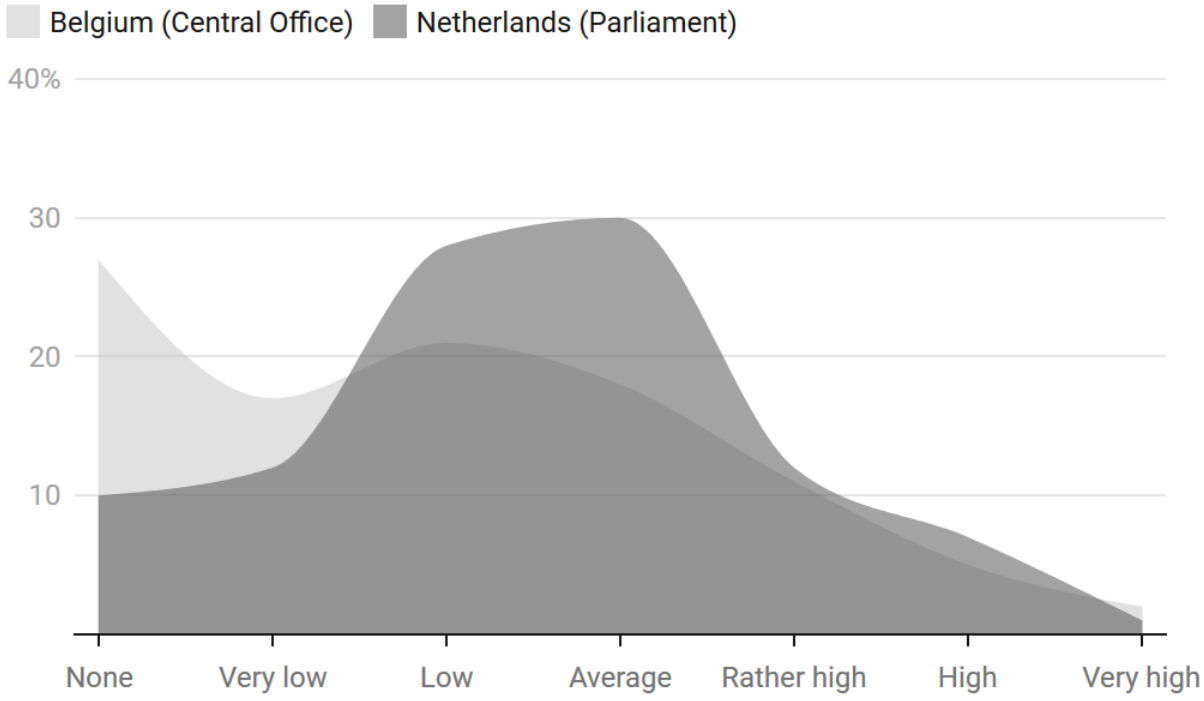


C.1.4. Influence on party in general of staff within same party face as party leader

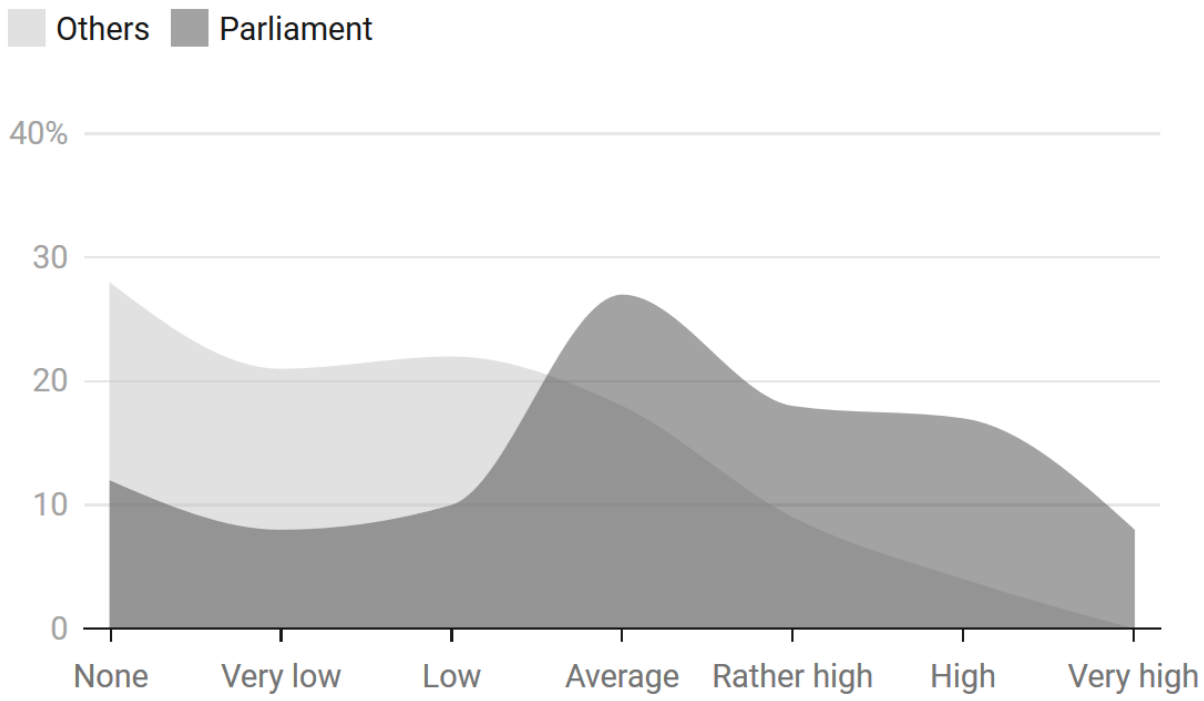


C.2. Influence on party leader





C.3. Influence on MP's



C.4. Influence on Minister